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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001432

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2014

TAGS: PTER PGOV ASEC CE LTTE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: GOVERNMENT TALKS TOUGH ABOUT RECENT KILLINGS

REF: A. USDAO COLOMBO IIR 6 816 0108 04

1B. COLOMBO 1390

1C. COLOMBO 1362

Classified By: CDA JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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MORE VIOLENCE . . .  
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11. (U) The week of August 20-27 saw a continuation of the violence between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its opponents cited in Ref B. On August 20 two senior-ranking Tigers were shot and killed by unidentified assailants as they left a meeting in Batticaloa. The proximity of the incident to an army post raised Tiger suspicions of Sri Lanka Army (SLA) involvement. The Tigers reportedly enforced a mandatory day of mourning, closing shops and businesses, in Tamil sections in the East on August 21. On August 23 suspected LTTE cadres, in apparent retaliation for the August 22 killings, fired on an SLA patrol in Batticaloa, injuring a soldier. On the same day in Colombo suspected LTTE militants killed a former Tiger-turned-SLA informant. On August 24 suspected LTTE assassins shot and killed a former supporter of breakaway LTTE leader Karuna as he was being brought by authorities into a courtroom in Ampara.

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BUT ANY MORE THAN USUAL?  
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12. (U) Reports of these incidents--and the Government of Sri Lanka's (GSL) saber-rattling rhetorical responses to them--were featured prominently throughout the week in the English and vernacular media. The English press trumpeted alarmist headlines like "Defend if necessary: Army Chief" and "Don't push us to war: (Acting Defense Minister) Ratnasiri"; "Stop killings or else, Ratnasiri tells LTTE." All major dailies carried extensive coverage of Acting Defense Minister Ratnasiri Wickremayake blasting the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) as "one-sided" before an audience of SLA soldiers in the north on August 23. Two days later, local papers were quoting Wickremayake as warning the LTTE that "there is a limit to our patience" in an address at Navy Headquarters. Coverage of Wickremayake's stern message ran below front-page color photos of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse inspecting SLA bunkers in the Eastern Province.

13. (C) Despite the media fanfare, some interlocutors contend that there are no more violations against GSL forces than usual. The Brigade Commander in Trincomalee told DATT on August 26 that the rate of LTTE violations against his forces remains at about the same level (Ref A). (Note: LTTE violations against other opponents, such as Karuna supporters, on the other hand, have increased. End note.) Per Christer Larsen of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) confirmed that the rate of reported incidents between LTTE and GSL security forces seemed no higher than usual. He added that the Karuna rift--and the LTTE's subsequent and systematic efforts to squelch his followers in the east--has fueled a spurt of Tamil-on-Tamil violence, and thus perhaps to a greater public perception that the Ceasefire Agreement is in jeopardy.

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MONITORS MOVE FOR MEETING  
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14. (SBU) In an effort to quell continued violence (and perhaps to bolster public confidence in the Ceasefire Agreement), the SLMM plans to hold separate meetings soon with the SLA and LTTE to resolve several outstanding points of contention, Larsen confirmed. As a first step, SLMM head Trond Furhovde met separately with Defense Secretary Cyril Herath in Colombo on August 25 and with LTTE political wing leader Thamilchelvan in Kilinochchi on August 25.

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COMMENT

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15. (C) LTTE efforts to re-assert its dominance in the east continue to spread violence and fear throughout the region (Ref B). The majority of the LTTE's recent attacks, however, have been aimed at opponents within the Tamil community (former Karuna supporters, former cadres-turned-informants), rather than at GSL security forces and facilities. With President and Defense Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga out of the country, Acting Defense Minister Wickremayake seems to be indulging his well-known penchant for bluster with even less restraint than usual. As noted Ref A, the GSL is in no position--either financially, logistically or politically--to unsheathe the sabers it has been rattling so fiercely over the past week. That said, the steady drumbeat of media coverage, coupled with the rhetorical broadsides launched by both the GSL and the LTTE, contribute to a public perception of escalating hostilities and an ever-more fragile Ceasefire Agreement (CFA). This is a dangerous game, especially for the GSL, which cannot afford diminished popular support for the CFA. The SLMM hopefully will move quickly to bring the two sides together for talks before the rhetoric gives way to even greater violence. It is also important to note that the trend cited by the EU delegation to LTTE political chief Thamilchelvan last week (Ref C) of all killings being carried out by "headquarters" LTTE has now been (slightly) reversed with the August 20 slayings of the two senior LTTE officials, presumably by Karuna supporters.

ENTWISTLE